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WHAT IS SOCIALISM?

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I

WHAT is Socialism? What are its aims? What does it seek to accomplish? What are its articles of faith? Why has it taken such tremendous hold on the educated as well as the ignorant that it threatens the destruction of society? If Socialism succeeds and Socialists come to be in the majority, will the world be happier, better, more virtuous; will life be made easier? These are some of the questions I have asked myself, after a careful study of the writings of the leading authorities on Socialism, which I shall endeavor to answer through the pages of this REVIEW.

What is Socialism? Here at the very threshold of the inquiry one runs, not against a closed door, but a door that swings both ways and leads to more than one passage. It must first be determined whether the speech or writings of a man calling himself a Socialist are those of an evolutionary or a revolutionary Socialist, for although both have the same end in view they reach it by different means. Such men as H. G. Wells, Bernard Shaw, Sidney Webb, to mention only a few of the most distinguished in England, and Victor Berger, John Spargo, and Robert Hunter in this country, are evolutionary Socialists; while Keir Hardie, Tom Mann (who was recently sentenced to prison for six months for

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trying to corrupt the British army), and Victor Grayson there, like Eugene V. Debs, W. D. Haywood, and the McNamara brothers here, are revolutionary Socialists. What is the difference in their methods and aims? In what do they agree? What is the common object for which they are striving, even though their policy may be different?

Before entering on an examination of these questions it is not out of place to say that the opponents of Socialism have too often approached the subject in a wrong spirit. They have been persuaded to regard Socialism as a disease and Socialists as vicious or ignorant persons laboring under a temporary obsession who needed only to be sternly scolded to be made to see their stupidity; or if they were not stupid, but simply criminal, then they must be treated like other malefactors and punished for trying to overturn an accepted law of society. Or they have regarded Socialism as something not to be taken seriously and not to be met with serious argument, but to be ridiculed or denounced, forgetting that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church and that in our day ridicule and denunciation have taken the place of the fagot and the rack. Or they have complacently dismissed Socialism as a dream, theoretically admirable, but practically impossible; and as this is an intensely practical age, the Socialist, they say, will outgrow his folly just as the child does who in infancy longed for the moon and forgets when given a new toy, for it is only idealists who pursue with one-ideaed persistence the unattainable. Finally, against Socialism are turned the guns of the Church and morality; Socialism is pronounced destructive to religion and subversive of morality; logically, therefore, a Socialist must be irreligious and unmoral; an enemy of society to be treated as a social pariah.

In every movement in which men are earnestly engaged, which they regard as vital for the good of mankind, which they honestly believe is for the advancement of society, the happiness of humanity, or the welfare of the individual, there are always to be found at least some elements of truth even if the cause is wrong and the zeal of the missionaries outruns their judgment and fanaticism engulfs charity. No really great cause can succeed without its fanatics, who are always the pioneers to prepare the way for a more refined civilization. Both Socialists and anti-Socialists are wrong, not entirely, but in part, because they are unable to see that

there may be a measure of truth in what the other claims. Both Socialists and anti-Socialists are right, not entirely, but in part, because each sees the weakness of the other's position and yet is unable to see that what now seems to be hopelessly irreconcilable is capable of reconciliation if justice and charity are substituted for the fagot and the rack.

Socialism is to be regarded neither as a disease—unless we look upon all ignorance as a sign of intellectual weakness—nor as the vagary of disordered minds. It is something far deeper than that. It has taken too firm a hold to be destroyed by a phrase. It would be an insult to intelligence, to the intelligence of the writer no less than to that of the reader, to attempt to dispose of such men as Wells and Shaw and Webb, and the thousands of others less well known, but almost their equal mentally, by branding them stupid or unintellectual, incapable of thinking for themselves, insincere, deluded, or dishonest. There may be, as there doubtless are, stupid or base or selfish Socialists, just as there are unworthy protectionists or free-traders, homeopaths or allopaths, lawyers, and clergymen, for man is the sum total of his temptations and environment and training; but human nature is as little influenced by the individual's economic belief as it is by the color of his coat. Even the most violent anti-Socialist, if a protectionist, would resent the imputation flung at him by the free-trader that all protectionists are fools or knaves and usually a combination of both. Let us, therefore, dismiss the idea that for a man to avow a belief in Socialism is to confess stupidity or dishonesty. It will make the problem easier if we stop calling names and concede to our opponents the same virtues we modestly claim for ourselves.

Nor is it judicious to look upon Socialism as a phase of evolution, of serious consequence for the moment but without permanent results. The wisest and most ignorant cannot be brought under the same influences without character being modified. A belief in Socialism permeates all classes, all ranks of society, all countries. Great thinkers and the unlettered peasant are its disciples. It is the one thing to destroy nationalism and to break down the barriers of creed and race, to merge class, to bring about that dreamed-of dream of the visionary, the reduction of society to a common level, which would result in dull mediocrity, stifle incentive, destroy initiative, and set back the progress of the

world. Socialism is a plant that thrives luxuriantly in all soils. It throws out its roots in the workshop, the factory, the mine, the college; it loses few adherents and gains many recruits. There are more Socialists to-day than there were last year, many more than there were ten years ago. And every year they become not less, but more sincere in their convictions, more firmly convinced of the justice of their cause, greater in their faith that ultimately they will prevail. The anti-Socialist who thinks the Socialist is not to be taken seriously is as wise as Pliny, who showed his philosophy in the face of the eruption of Vesuvius and perished for his temerity. Philosophy is a very valuable quality, but common sense is even more valuable at times.

Socialism is a dream, but its believers are not dreamers. We who see in it the realization of the impossible may be justified in calling them visionaries, but to the very practical men who are the rank and file of Socialism there is nothing about it that to them seems impractical. It is no closet philosophy, and its high priests are not mystics. The man who thinks and works with his hands has neither time nor inclination to indulge in vague speculations. He is a materialist through the association of ideas, for under his hands the material shapes itself, but the spiritual has no place. To the miner working in the bowels of the earth coal is simply coal—to be expressed in the terms of so much labor, so many dollars, so much clothing and food, perhaps a little happiness; more often misery and death; but the wonder of Nature's workshop does not touch him; the imagination that can conceive trees and leaves slowly transformed into coal through ten thousand years, there to lie for another decade of centuries until it is dug out by his own hand so it may give him warmth and cook his day's food is denied him. These are the practical men to whose materialism Socialism makes its appeal. Socialism glorifies the material and debases the spiritual.

Socialism cannot be combated by the attempt to outlaw it as an enemy of religion or morality. We have come to that time in the world's history when we live in a secular and not a theological age; and while religion enters into man's life, it is apart from it and not a part of it, as it was in the day when the Church claimed the right to rule. Nor can religion be tied to morality nor morality to religion. A man may be religious in the sense in which the term is gen-

erally understood and yet be a Socialist; he may be none the less moral because he is ready to overturn a social system that he regards as morally wrong and indefensible and built on an unmoral foundation. Later this phase of the question will be discussed more at length, but it is sufficient now merely to refer to it.

A cause that numbers its adherents by the hundreds of thousands, in whose ranks are found men and women of all classes and all conditions, many of whom are of a high order of intelligence, sincere, devoted, leading blameless lives, sacrificing comfort and wealth in an effort to ameliorate conditions that an advanced state of civilization has made inevitable, cannot be whistled down the wind as a thing trivial in itself or without serious consequences. Back of it there must be a reason. What, then, is there to Socialism that makes it popular and threatens society?

The answer is to be found in a single word—Economic.

Socialism, it is believed, will correct every economic abuse. If we are as honest as some of the anti-Socialists contend their opponents are dishonest, then we must admit—which is not possible of denial, for the evidence is all around us—that there is great inequality of conditions, that many men have so much money that it is bad for them and many more have a great deal less than is good for them, that rewards are not equally distributed, that there is much suffering and misery, that life to the average man and woman is harder than it ought to be. It is easy enough to find the reason with a wave of the hand. It is the arm-chair philosopher who tells us that every man has that to which he is exactly entitled—no more, no less. If he is industrious, frugal, intelligent, he prospers; if he is slothful, extravagant, stupid he fails. He has to blame no one but himself. Sitting in his well-warmed library, now and then unconsciously thinking of the snow falling outside and the sleighing he will enjoy to-morrow, the arm-chair philosopher loves to write of Opportunity. The Republic is Opportunity, he writes with facile pen; for the library is well warmed and well lighted, and the books he needs for reference are conveniently at hand. It is easy to write of the virtues of thrift when one has a comfortable balance in the bank and the usual semi-annual dividends have been declared payable next month; but the poor wretch who is shivering outside knows nothing of the virtue of thrift and has been denied that opportunity

which the philosopher believes is waiting for every man to grasp.

The man shivering in the cold, hungry, homeless, friendless, is a Socialist, if not in *esse*, in *posse*, ready to believe that Socialism is the short cut to perfection and the remedy for all wrongs; that if society was organized on a Socialistic instead of an individualistic basis there would be no wrongs; that instead of being cold he would be warm, instead of being hungry he would be well fed, instead of being homeless he would have a home and comfort, instead of being friendless he would have companions. And the man who sits in the library writing futile things, who has risen once or twice during the course of the evening to draw aside the heavy curtains so that he can enjoy the beauty of the snow-decked trees, their branches glistening under the electric lights—for the man has the soul of the poet as well as the mind of a philosopher—is an anti-Socialist to whom Socialism is not only an abhorrent thing, but also a foolish thing. The meaning of the homeless wretch he can no more understand than his philosophy can find a remedy.

Socialism, a thing conceived in the brain of man, is to undo the work of man, its disciples believe. Poverty, injustice, hardship, suffering; painful toil niggardly paid; risks that must be taken without adequate reward—all those things, in fact, of which the average man complains, sometimes with justice, sometimes because he is ignorant or dishonest—in a word, everything that is wrong because of the imperfection of human nature has been brought about, Socialists say, by the dishonesty of man. The laws on which society has been slowly built and has advanced from barbarism to civilization are unjust. The whole social scheme, which is the painful growth of two thousand years, for which man has labored and fought and died, is a mistake, and man has always been on the wrong track. Everything is to be corrected, everything complained of is to be swept away by Socialism, the latest device of man's invention. If for two thousand years man has been wandering in a maze, is there any guarantee that Socialism will lead him to the right path? Why is Socialism wisdom and all else ignorance? Is it not true that Socialism is simply a theory, another of those experiments that the world is always making; and is it not equally true that it is an experiment too dangerous for prudent and patriotic men to sanction?

It is not to be wondered at that Socialism should be popular. It is not to be wondered at that men of intelligence, as well as ignorant men, should be allured by its fallacies. The surprising thing is not that Socialism has its thousands, but that it has not its tens of thousands, for it *seems* to lead the way out of all difficulties; it is such a simple cure for all evils; it appeals so strongly to self-interest; it is the one remedy that is efficacious where all others have been tried and failed. The man who is weak in mind or spirit believes in the nostrum that is offered him until he knows that it, like scores of other concoctions, has no virtue; but profiting nothing by experience, still seeking health or peace, he can be prevailed to continue his search and fatten the pockets of quack purveyors. Socialism is wrong, fundamentally wrong. Economically and socially it is wrong. It is founded on false principles, although it contains a glimmer of truth. If Socialism were put into operation the very men who now so ardently demand it would be the first to see that its theoretical perfection is a practical impossibility and would be the loudest to clamor for a new order of things. Their last state would be worse than the first. Instead of the mass having gained, it would have lost; instead of the world having advanced, it would have fallen back; instead of man having found promise, he would meet despair. To the Socialist Pandora, typical of hope, is symbolic, but if his foolish wish were gratified his tutelary deity would be the goddess Ate, who, cast out of Olympus by Zeus, wandered about the earth confusing men and leading them to their ruin.

It will be the purpose of subsequent articles to point out wherein Socialism is wrong and why it offers no solution for the faults of our social system; to offer, perhaps, before the series is concluded, a suggestion or two that will neither revolutionize society, nor make the poor rich, nor the foolish wise, nor the feeble strong—for these are things laws cannot do, but each man must do for himself to the utmost of his capacity—but which may bring about that amelioration of conditions which men of all shades of opinion are united in agreeing is desirable.

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(To be Continued.)